Privacy advocates blast AT&T's alleged sale of info to CIA

Advocacy groups ask the FCC to declare the carrier in violation of federal privacy rules.

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AT&T's Global Network Operations Center in Bedminster, N.J.
AT&T

Consumer advocates have asked federal regulators to declare phone companies to be in violation of federal privacy rules when they sell subscriber information to third parties, including the CIA.

ed by Public Knowledge, several privacy groups asked the Federal Communications Commission on Wednesday to declare that such cooperation in violation of the Communications Act, which restricts how carriers may use or sell subscribers' personal information. The action is in response to a New York Times report last month that the CIA pays AT&T for access to subscriber data.

"Americans should be able to rest assured that carriers can't just turn around and secretly share or sell that information with marketers or the government without consent," Public Knowledge staff attorney aura Moy said in a statement. "This section of the Communications Act was designed to protect consumers' privacy, and the FCC should do just that by vigorously enforcing it."

Public Knowledge warned that its research indicated that the four major mobile carriers -- AT&T, Sprint, T-Mobile, and Verizon -- "all have privacy policies that indicate that it is okay to sell or share similar records," Moy wrote in a companion blog post.

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"We don't know whether or not they actually are selling [personal information], but the fact that they think they can is alarming," Moy wrote. Joining Public Knowledge on the petition were the Electronic Frontier Foundation, the Electronic Privacy Information Center, Free Press, the Center for Digital Democracy, and the New America Foundation's Open Technology Institute.

While saying it doesn't comment on questions related to any country's national security, AT&T said it has rejected government requests for customer information many times.

"Wherever we serve our customers, we maintain those customers' data and information in compliance with the laws that apply in the country where that service is provided," an AT&T spokesperson said in a statement. "It has been our experience that, no matter the country, laws related to government requests for customer information apply equally to all privately-owned telecom providers. ike all telecom providers, we routinely charge governments for producing the information provided."

Citing information from unnamed government officials, the Times reported in November that the CIA pays AT&T more than $10 million a year for customer phone records used to help track down potential terrorists. The CIA gives AT&T the phone numbers of suspected terrorists in other countries, according to the Times. In return, AT&T voluntarily culls through its database for any call records that could identify the associates of those suspects.

Updated 12/12 at 9:45 a.m. PT: with AT&T comment.

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